

Deadly E. coli O111 absent from sampled wells

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The rare and virulent E. coli O111 that killed a Pryor man and sickened hundreds of other people in August was not found in any of the Locust Grove wells sampled recently by the state environmental quality agency.

But three other types of disease-causing E. coli bacteria — O141, O179 and O113 — were found in a few wells, the state's Health, Agriculture and Environmental Quality departments said in a joint announcement.

Leslea Bennett-Webb, a spokeswoman for the Oklahoma State Department of Health, said: "This information is very helpful. However, we're still analyzing additional samples taken from that area."

The results came in Tuesday from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, she said.

Oklahoma Attorney General Drew Edmondson announced Feb. 13 that it was "highly likely" that poultry waste runoff into the Illinois River watershed caused the deadly E. coli outbreak. At his urging, the Department of Environmental Quality sampled private wells in the Locust Grove area.

Of 74 wells tested, 59 were found to have total coliform bacteria, a group of bacteria that indicate environmental pollution. Seventeen wells tested positive for E. coli bacteria, which is associated with human or animal waste, Bennett-Webb said.

"It boiled down to the fact that three wells had disease-causing E. coli," she said. They are associated with cattle, sheep or other ruminant animals, she said.

Early in its investigation, the Health Department ruled out the well water at the Country Cottage restaurant in Locust Grove. E. coli bacteria were found in the well, but none were disease-causing strains, Bennett-Webb said.

But Edmondson's spokesman, Charlie Price, said the fact "that none of these three E. coli bacteria are type O111 is of little comfort when illness-causing bacteria is still found in these wells. The CDC has confirmed what we suspected all along, that harmful bacteria is seeping into the groundwater. It's imperative that the agencies continue their work to identify the cause."

Edmondson had declared just Monday that the Health Department had "botched" its investigation.

Edmondson, who has announced that he might run for governor, filed a lawsuit against 13 Arkansas poultry companies in 2005, alleging that chicken waste used to fertilize crops in the Illinois River watershed could be a danger to public health.

Gary Mickelson, a spokesman for Tyson Foods Inc., one of the companies that Edmondson is suing, said the latest findings "are additional proof of the inaccuracy of the attorney general's unsubstantiated claim of a connection between poultry litter and last year's unfortunate outbreak."

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